

The background of the cover is an abstract, textured artwork with a dense, granular appearance. It features a rich palette of colors including deep blues, vibrant oranges, bright yellows, and rich reds, all intermingled in a non-representational, painterly style. A large, clean white rectangular box is centered on the page, containing the title and author information.

Disciplinary Guide:

Language Studies

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International Students Network

About the author



Vijay Ramjattan is a critical adult educator and researcher currently working at the Universities of Guelph and Toronto. His research interests pertain to the intersections of language, race, and work within the context of (international) education. He is a co-editor of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Language and Prejudice*.

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About this series

Research with international students is an interdisciplinary field and there are a wide range of research disciplines which can add to our thinking about this subject. This series brings together global experts to present different research disciplines and their application to this research topic with the aim of encouraging more interdisciplinary thinking.

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Outlining language studies

Language studies can be considered an umbrella term for language-focused fields such as (applied and) (socio)linguistics, linguistic anthropology, language education, language policy and planning, discourse analysis, rhetoric, speech language pathology, and so on. As such, it ranges from language learning and the careful study of the structure and use of named languages to in-depth analyses of how language operates in society. Language studies is thus a multi- and interdisciplinary field which examines language from varied perspectives.

While its multifaceted nature makes it difficult to adequately trace its origins, the development of language studies could be tied to the intellectual elite of various societies in the ancient world. For example, language being an object of study has been first tied to Pāṇini, an Indian scholar living in the fifth century BCE, who recorded the grammatical rules of Sanskrit (Itkonen, 1991). Moreover, in ancient Rome, elite schools taught students “formal Latin” through the reading of Latin poetry (Foster, 2019). What particularly spurred the growth of modern forms of language studies such as linguistics and literary studies was the development of comparative philology, which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European colonialists used to highlight the linguistic “deficiencies” of colonized peoples, thereby further justifying the maintenance of empire (Said, 1978). These histories of language studies demonstrate that neither language nor the formal study of it are apolitical.

Recognizing the political nature of language and language studies has been the mandate of an increasing amount of scholarship starting from the latter part of the twentieth century. Indeed, critical language studies research has rejected the idea that language can be studied as an autonomous system of communication divorced from its users and the social relations which have shaped it (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). The criticality that undergirds such research has drawn from a range of theoretical traditions including Marxist approaches

which focus on language ideology and structures of oppression, postmodern constructionism which does not adopt grand narratives like Marxist theories, but rather explores the production of meanings and identities within discourse and relations of power, and postcolonial theories which actively challenge the lasting legacy of European colonialism on deficit perspectives of minoritized language users (Kubota & Miller, 2017). Although these critical approaches do offer significant contributions to language studies as a field, it is also important to note that there is further room to grow.

For instance, because postcolonial scholarship can still rely on European intellectual traditions when theorizing matters of language, there is an increasing call to adopt theoretical perspectives from the Global South to better balance global knowledge production (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). Part of this adoption can entail questioning the notion of language itself by acknowledging how languages are political inventions of nation-states that do not adequately represent the everyday linguistic practices of people, which is the focus of research on *translanguaging* (Li, 2022). Having a more expansive understanding of language is also pertinent when addressing the lack of inclusion of signed languages in language studies scholarship (Henner & Robinson, 2023).

Employing language studies in research with international students

Here are a few avenues of inquiry for those interested in using language studies scholarship in research with international students.

1. Interrogating the construction of linguistic “deficiencies” and oppression

Much research treats international students as having linguistic “deficiencies” that need to be remedied, all without a critical consideration of how these “deficiencies” are institutionally created (Ramjattan, 2024). That is, there is nothing inherently inferior

about the linguistic repertoires of international students other than that they do not always match hegemonic communication norms established by higher education institutions. This can be exemplified by the racial and colonial logics underpinning university language policies which unfairly require certain types of international students to prove their proficiency in the language of the host institution/country (Piller & Bodis, 2024). The institutionalized deficit perspectives of international students' language practices can also create environments where language is used as a proxy to perpetuate various forms of oppression. If language is simply treated as a technical skill to master, then it becomes acceptable to linguistically discriminate against international students on the basis of race, ethnicity, and nationality, for instance (Dovchin, 2020).

2. The complexities of academic communication

While international students often study and work in academic environments which promote singular manners of communication, this is not to say that they use language to communicate in a singular manner. Indeed, research on translanguaging can highlight how international students draw on different aspects of their entire linguistic repertoires to affirm their own unique identities, accommodate different interlocutors, and so on (e.g., Shi, 2023). In the context of different academic disciplines which may have established their own communicative cultures, international students in these disciplines may have to conceive of language and communication not only in the phonocentric sense of utilizing verbal resources, but also as the use of other semiotic and spatial resources to convey an intended message to disciplinary audiences (Canagarajah, 2018). Exploring these types of complex language practices can once again highlight how language is not a detached set of rules, but rather, a situated practice constantly in flux.

3. The discursive framing of international students

Beyond the deficit perspectives and actual complexity of their language practices, another important area of inquiry concerns analyzing the language used to describe international students themselves. Work in the area of critical discourse studies can

offer important insights into how these students are discursively positioned to satisfy specific geopolitical aims. For example, whether it is through policy and media documents or even scholarly literature, international students can be constructed as ideal migrants meant to bolster national economies in one context and then perceived as foreign threats to a nation in another (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). What is important to investigate in these types of studies is how the category of “international student” goes beyond a legal classification to become a means to lessen and/or maintain the distinction between the self and other.

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- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
- Shi, W. (2023). A positioning analysis of international graduate students’ perspectives and practices of translanguaging at a Canadian higher education institution. *International Journal of Multilingualism*. Advance online publication.

Suggested resources

For critical overviews and historical perspectives on language studies and specific subfields such as (applied) linguistics:

Charity Hudley, A.H., Clemons, A., & Villarreal, D. (2023). Language across the disciplines. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 9, 253-272.

Heller, M., & McElhinny, B. (2017). *Language, capitalism, colonialism: Towards a critical history*. University of Toronto Press.

Pennycook, A. (2021). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical re-introduction*. Routledge.

For introductions to increasingly popular areas of inquiry within language studies:

Alim, H.S., Reyes, A., & Kroskrity, P.V. (Eds.). *The Oxford handbook of language and race*. Oxford University Press.

Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2015). Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 6(3), 281-307.

Heugh, K., Stroud, C., Taylor-Leech, K., & De Costa, P.I. (Eds.). (2021). *A sociolinguistics of the south*. Routledge.

Rangan, P., Saxena, A., Srinivasan, R.T., & Sundar, P. (Eds.). (2023). *Thinking with an accent: Toward a new object, method, and practice*. University of California Press.

For accessible discussions on the social dimensions of language:

[The Social Life of Language](#): a YouTube channel exploring language and social theory

[The Vocal Fries Pod](#): a podcast about linguistic discrimination

[Unstandardized English](#): a podcast on language, race, disability, and a wide array of other topics

For an example of how I incorporate language studies into my own research with international students:

Ramjattan, V.A. (2023). The accent work of international teaching assistants. *TESOL Quarterly*, 57(4), 1256-1281.





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